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ABSTRACT

Differences in Thai and American world views that point to cultural differences where misunderstandings can occur are considered. These differences reflect an alternative view of reality, not just language or verbal differences. Thailand has never been under foreign rule; most of the people are Buddhists; and 80 percent of Thai people are involved in agriculture. Thai culture, beliefs, and life styles are analyzed and compared to those of Americans with respect to the following topics: man and nature, the philosophy of Buddhism, fate, time, animism, ghosts, animals, the ideal self, social relations, status, sex roles, friendship, nonverbal behavior, behavior in public, dress, and dining. Buddhist thoughts that influence the Thai world view include: man must live in harmony with nature and natural law, and doing acts of goodness influences fate. In contrast, Americans tend to view the world as material rather than spiritual and seek to dominate and exploit nature. Buddhism teaches that all life is sacred and involved in the cycle of birth and rebirth. Though Thais may not seem serious to Western eyes, Buddhism teaches a certain detachment from life, acceptance of fate, and enjoyment of life. Americans value activity and doing; Thais value interpersonal relationships and enjoyment of life. American concerns are self-expression, self-interest, self-development, and independence, while Thai values are more directed toward family interest, people around them, and interdependence. (SW)

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THAI WAYS AND MY WAYS Dick L. Williams

World View

Americans often say, "People are alike all over." This is true and not true. As members of the same species, all men share basic human emotions, but culture is a powerful force that teaches its participants when it is appropriate to show or hide these feelings.

Thais are like Americans in some ways and different in others. This article focuses on some differences in Thai and American world views that point to cultural differences where misunderstandings can occur.

These differences are more than just a language or verbal difference. They reflect an alternative view of reality. Thai world view is often radically different from our own and severe misunderstandings can result. The differences are not just superficial ones. But neither culture can objectively be said to be better or worse--just different.

Not all Thais share the attitudes described in this article; Bangkok is very different from the provinces. Thai culture contains nearly all human possibilities, just as American culture does. This article brings out broad generalizations that will usually be valid.

Thailand, roughly the shape of an elephant's head and about the size of Texas, means "Land of the Free" and has never been under foreign colonization like its neighbors. This long history of freedom is a source of pride to Thai citizens, who are rather nationalistic. The metaphor of the bamboo that bends with the wind is often mentioned in reference to Thai foreign policy.

The old name for Thailand--Siam--was changed in 1941. And the capital, Bangkok, is not called this by Thais. It's name is Krung Theep, "City of the Angels."

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MAN AND NATURE

A culture's world view is reflected in its patterns of behavior, which usually follow logically from the world view. In general, Thais see the ideal relation of man and nature (and the cosmos) as one of harmony. Americans tend to exploit and control nature for their own benefit and comfort. Let's look first at the Thai world view.

Eighty percent of Thai people are involved in agriculture, which is the basis of their economy. This contrasts with the approximately 70-80 percent urban United States and has some influence on the different world views of the two cultures.

Life up-country is slow and easy. Farmers' wives sell their fruit and vegetables from the canals called khlongs that criss-cross the central plain. Time passes more slowly. There is time to be more personal. Traditions run deeper. Here man should accept the natural order of karma or fate as determined by actions in previous lives.

Traditional up-country houses are built on poles above the chickens and potential flood waters. Nature takes care of any garbage dropped through the floor boards to the ground below. Either the animals eat it or the monsoon rains that come every afternoon during the rainy season wash it away.

However, since World War II, Thailand has prospered and changed. The boom in motorcycles and tape recorders has caused some discontent and increased expectations. Many young people are going to Bangkok looking for jobs. They share a new, modern attitude that material comforts are desired and expected. This conflicts with Buddhist ideals of freedom from desire and worldly wants.

But it would be a mistake to think that Thailand doesn't have many modern aspects. A foreigner should be careful not to imply that Thailand is underdeveloped by asking seemingly innocent questions about whether

there are freeways or television in Thailand. Of course, there are. Thai people are nationalistic and sensitive to comments that suggest they may be undeveloped.

Urban Bangkok contrasts sharply with the slower pace of the provinces. Life in this industrial city of four million can be as hectic as in any Western city.

It is said that Bangkok is 'westernized.' On the surface this is true. But underneath are still many of the old Thai values.

While Thailand and America are both "The Land of the Free," the United States is also the land of the freeway--the car society. Most U.S. families own a car--often two, and the average family moves to another home every four years. The reign of the automobile is one example of the American attitude toward nature--technology is used to exploit it.

Americans view the world as material rather than spiritual and consequently try to use it for their own benefit. Rapid westward expansion and 200 years of rapid growth into the open frontier have made this attitude possible--at least until recently.

Today, however, the problems of pollution and rising oil prices have pushed their way into the American consciousness. Still, many Americans (especially in the western states with "wide open spaces") are unwilling to obey the 55 mph speed limit to conserve gasoline. The attitude seems to be that ecology and conservation are good only as long as they don't affect one's freedom or self-interest too much.

Incidentally, the idea of ecology is considered a modern idea in the United States, but not in many other countries of the world where it has been necessary to practice it for centuries in order to survive.

Generally, Americans treat nature objectively--as an object or force

to be controlled--and have unnatural (i.e. technologically controlled) environments to live in. If our technology broke down or suddenly disappeared, much of the urban population would probably not survive. Even our modern illnesses like cancer, hypertension, heart disease, and drug-related birth defects seem to be from causes which result from advanced technology (and are "unnatural).

BUDDHISM

Understanding the philosophy of Buddhism is also important in order to understand Thai world view. Buddhism teaches that man must live in harmony with nature and natural law. In life, nothing is permanent; change is inherent in the universe and dissatisfaction is always part of life. The ultimate goal is to escape worldly attachments (or at least be born into a higher position) and enter one of the many levels of sawan (Thai "heaven"). Each man must do this for himself since there is no God or Savior (though in Thai Buddhism a Buddha or higher being in the chain of existence is believed to be able to intercede) to help him in his quest.

Attainment of Nirvana (at the highest level of sawan) is gained by following the Noble Eight-Fold Path, which consists of (1) correct understanding of Buddha's teaching, (2) correct thinking through detachment or objectivity, (3) proper speech, which includes saying pleasant things about others, (4) right action, which requires self-control, (5) right vocation that harms no living thing, (6) effort to understand truth, (7) a proper attitude of realism, not illusion, and (8) right concentration to get insight--often through meditation.

There are five important moral precepts: Do not kill any life form. Do not steal. Do not commit adultery or sexual misconduct. Do not speak falsely. Avoid alcohol and drugs which dull the mind.

Monks have many more rules. Some well-known ones are: not to eat after 12:00 noon; not to attend entertainments or use jewelry or decoration; not to sleep on a comfortable mattress. They should be celibate while a monk.

Ninety-five percent of Thais are Buddhist and many Thai men become monks for at least a few months in their lives—usually at age twenty during the rainy season. Every morning, monks are seen with their "begging bowls" receiving rice from whomever is offering it, but they are certainly not beggars or parasites on society. Be careful not to imply this in Thailand. The giver is honored by being able to feed the monks and make merit.

Thai Buddhism teaches that the universe operates on a cause/effect law. "Do good and you will receive good" is the law of karma. Both the good and the evil a person does are passed on to the future and future lives.

The origin of man is unknown.

Strict Buddhist doctrine states there is no "soul" in the Western sense of an immortal personality. Simply one's life force is reborn into another form until it reaches Nirvana. In spite of this, many Thais believe that being born again will happen to them personally; by making merit or doing good deeds, one can receive benefits in this life and the next.

Buddhist monasteries were traditionally the centers of education and social life. Travellers may stay overnight or hear the latest news there.

Though Buddhists are very tolerant of other religious views, a few Westerners have been arrested for "desecrating" Buddha statues by climbing on their shoulders, for example, to have their pictures taken. To an American, a Buddha may be just a decorative sculpture; to a Thai, it's the sacred symbol of their religion. In a Thai friend's home, it wouldn't be good manners to touch the Buddha statues or images without asking first. Thais often complain that Westerners keep Buddha statues in low places in their homes or use them as ash trays, hat racks, or decorations. Small Buddha images shouldn't be carried lower than the chest, either—in pants' pockets, for example.

Thais don't worship statues of Buddha. The image is to remind them of Buddha when they pray, as statues of saints in a Catholic church do.

FATE

As mentioned before, Thai Buddhists believe that if a person does good, he will receive good; the universe operates on a cause and effect law. But one's karma or fate cannot be avoided once it has been set in motion by good actions or ignorant actions. Former lives as well as the present one affect future existences of the individual.

Doing acts of goodness is the way a Thai Buddhist influences his fate. By freeing birds, turtles or other small animals, a person can show respect for all living things and make merit. Other acts that make merit are financing a new temple, giving food to monks, putting gold leaf on a Buddha statue, almsgiving or ritually bathing a Buddha image on religious holidays. On Wisaka Bucha Day, which is the anniversary of the birth, death, and enlightenment of the Buddha (which occurred in different years, of course) Thais come to the temples to make merit by walking three times around a chedi, or pagoda, carrying flowers, candles, and incense.

Another aspect of the Thai attitude towards fate is shown in the expression Mai Pen Rai. Sometimes, Thais seem to treat serious matters lightly. For example, if something is stolen from your house and you get excited, your Thai friends might smile and say Mai Pen Rai, which means, "It doesn't matter" or Never mind." It matters to you, of course, but the Thai attitude is to keep cool. Why get excited about something you cannot control? Accept fate. They call it jai yen, cool heart.

Astrology and fortunetelling are still popular in Thailand and have a small following in the U.S., as well. Thai fortunetellers, however, do not look into crystal balls to discover a person's fate but do use cards and palm reading to predict the future. Astrologers usually draw up charts of the heavens to select auspicious days for marriages, cremations, or to choose a name for the baby. Monks often do the charts as well.

Most Thais wear Buddhist medals around their necks. These offer protection and many Thais believe that no harm can come to them if they wear these medals. This may

give Bangkok taxi drivers the confidence to drive as they do. When wearing a Buddha image, a man shouldn't go into a massage parlor, a brothel, or even under a clothes line where women's underwear is hanging. It's also important to wear an uneven number of medals.

Americans tend to see fate in rather different ways. "In God We Trust" is the motto on U.S. coins that seems to show the American ideal world view of fate. However, American usually act under the influence of Newtonian Physics as if the world is controllable and rational in human terms and that man largely controls his own destiny. In other words, "God helps those who help themselves."

Historically, the American cliché has been the self-made man, who by determination and hard work, overcomes all odds and reaches the bright lights of Broadway or rises to the top of the business world or whatever. If all men are created equal and have equal opportunity as they should, the hardest working and most deserving will succeed. The fable of the hare and the tortoise illustrates this ideal. This American, middle-class concept of equality of opportunity explains why a waiter in America shouldn't be treated as an inferior.

TIME

In Buddhism, time is symbolized by a wheel called "The Wheel of Birth and Rebirth." The universe has no beginning and no end but always changes; time is an endless cycle. In Christian belief, time and the universe had a definite beginning with The Creation—and will someday end. These contrasting beliefs seem to influence the two cultures' attitudes towards time.

Thais, especially up-country, operate at their own slower pace. Being punctual and rushing around are Western obsessions and an American may have problems trying to adjust to the slower pace of Thai culture. Thai time is 'looser' than American time. Human relations are more important than clockbound schedules. Delays and interruptions are expected and accepted; why trouble yourself over unimportant details?

The past is also important because past actions influence the present and future. Older persons are more valued and respected. Tradition and formality are honored.

Americans value punctuality and promptness and are very time-conscious. They may apologize for being a few minutes late because arriving late for an appointment implies indifference or even insult. A fast, efficient work pace and continued effort to improve are admired qualities.

These "qualities" are often criticized by Thais. From their point of view, Americans are in too much of a hurry and worry too much about punctuality. Thais joke about the American who is invited to dinner at 7:00, arrives at his host's door at 6:55 and then waits for five minutes before knocking.

On the other hand, Americans may incorrectly assume a Thai co-worker is lazy, then overreact and insult the Thai, who is only operating at his culture's slower pace.

Americans see time as lineal (rather than cyclical) and moving in one direction towards the future. They say that time can be spent, saved, used, managed, or wasted. They like efficient scheduling of appointments and taking one thing at a time. Because of this attitude, they are more easily annoyed by delays and interruptions.

The U.S. is a "doing" culture rather than a "being" culture as Thailand is. "Progress is (their) most important product." It is future-oriented and youth is valued over old age.

ANIMISM

We said that Americans tend to view the world as material rather than spiritual and seek to dominate and exploit nature. Man, however, is unique and separate from animals and nature because he possesses a soul.

In contrast to this, a popular Thai world view sees man as a part of a natural order that he should live in harmony with. Man has a spirit but so do many other life forms and even objects.

When I first got to Thailand, I saw many small "houses" on columns in front of most of the houses. I first thought the Thais must be very kind to birds--showing

a proper Buddhist regard for all life forms. But, of course, they weren't bird houses but "spirit houses."

There is an animistic element in Thai Buddhism left over from the older religion of Brahmanism. Thais pray to guardian property spirits called phra phuum, which are displaced when a house is built on the land. Thais burn incense and leave food, flowers, and small stuatues in the spirit houses in return for a wish or favor granted. Thais see no contradiction between this animism and their Buddhist philosophy, just as Americans ignore the contradiction between the Easter bunny, of Pagan origin, and the religious meaning of Easter.

Spirit houses are always placed so that the shadow of the house never falls on them and a guest who stays overnight pays respects to the phra phuum on arriving and leaving. Thai people promise extravagant gifts like an elephant or a feast if their prayer is granted—then leave a symbolic, paper elephant or clay food in the spirit house when the prayer comes true.

There are also spirits which live in the door sills of temples, houses, and bows of boats. For this reason, a visitor should be careful to step over a threshold rather than on it, especially when entering the altar room of a temple, where you must always take off your shoes. In a few temples, like Wat Doi Suthep in Chiengmai, it is necessary to take off shoes to enter the temple grounds. Just look for a pile of shoes by the door to know when to take them off.

Thais believe that a person's sacred spirit or life force, called khwan, is located in their heads—about where the cowlick is. Touching a person's head for any reason shows great disrespect; Thais avoid touching each other there. If violated, some Thais feel strongly enough about this to fight.

In rural Thailand, touching a child's head playfully, as Americans sometimes do, should be avoided since the khwan is connected to heaven here (in Brahmin philosophy). The child may become ill and the person who touched him could be blamed. Disease is sometimes caused by a frightening or loss of khwan.

This belief in khwan has many effects on Thai behavior. It's bad manners to look over an older person's head to greet a friend, for example. On a train or plane, it wouldn't be polite to reach over someone's head to get your suitcase from the overhead rack either.

Once, in Bangkok, my telephone, which is under the stairway, rang as the maid was going up the stairs. When I answered the phone, the maid ran down the stairs saying "excuse me." She had accidentally walked over my head.

Consider for a moment how a Thai might react to someone sitting on a pillow. You may have guessed that there are spirits in the pillow, but actually the pillow rests the head and sacred khwan. It's for a person's head and shouldn't be used for other, lower parts.

In fact, there is a sort of hierarchy of body parts. Things associated with head and higher body level tend to be more "respected," while things or actions associated with feet or lower body level farther from khwan indicate low respect. For this reason, someone putting his feet up on a chair or table shows disrespect for other people who might be in the room. Pointing the bottom of one's foot at another person is one of the most offensive things a foreigner can do in Thailand. One shouldn't set children on a desk or table so that his feet point towards someone's face. This even applies to opening a door with your foot. A polite Thai would set the books down and open the door with his hand. And pointing out or sliding something with your foot could quickly end a friendship. Some traditional Thais believe that hanging socks, from the lowest part of the body, higher than a shirt, from a higher part of the body, somehow violates khwan.

GHOSTS

Thai Buddhism (influenced by Brahmanism) teaches that there are several realms of existence, including Hell, the world of giants, the realm of man, the animal kingdom, and hungry ghosts from the spirit world. For Thais, many ghosts are female. They have the ability to appear beautiful at first—then change to very ugly when they have a victim,

like the ghost called phii gasuu, which is a normal woman by day. She has no proper body--just a head, an esophagus and intestines, which glow and blink like a firefly as she flies. By night she eats feces and garbage. Sometimes she attacks humans and eats their livers or perhaps a tasty umbilical cord after childbirth. She inherits her affliction from her mother, who spits into her daughter's mouth just before dying. She can be killed by sunlight or by a thorn in her intestines.

Another nasty ghost is one called phii gahang. He sleeps by day as a man, but at night flies about looking for muck to eat. Though it seems aerodynamically unsound, he uses two winnowing baskets for wings.

Most ghosts are lower souls representing the passions of people who have died violently. The ghost is left behind by the Khwan or "soul" and is not involved in reincarnation. When a person dies a violent death, the ghost hangs around for a time. For example, when a woman dies in childbirth or someone is killed by cholera or a wild animal.

There are also some ghosts which are useful. In the past, live men were sometimes buried under the main posts of buildings to protect them. Other ghosts can find lost objects or frighten children who stay out after dark.

Fewer Thais believe in ghosts these days and the government seeks to discredit these beliefs. But in rural areas especially, ghosts are still blamed for bad luck and illnesses.

ANIMALS

Thai and American attitudes about animals also contrast. Buddhism teaches that all life is sacred and involved in the cycle of birth and rebirth. A prevalent American attitude is that man is separate from animals because of his soul.

The Buddhist doctrine of right vocation rejects the idea of harming other life forms. Therefore, butchers and tanners of animal hides(usually ethnic Chinese) have

low status.

To make merit, and show regard for life in a symbolic way, it was said that Buddhists buy small animals in the market and release them. Monks will also drink water through a piece of cloth to filter out any possible organisms that may be killed. All life is part of the same reality and involved in reincarnation and is sacred.

In the northern forests, man and elephant work together in the teak forests—almost as partners. During the hot season, the elephants are freed to forage on their own in the jungle.

Men who have not lived according to Buddhist moral precepts may be reborn as something lower than human. This is another reason to be kind to animals.

The protein in the traditional Thai diet has come mainly from fish and seafood. Thai fisherman might rationalize killing these fish by saying that he didn't kill them. He only removed them from the water and they died a natural death. It would then be a pity to waste them.

Though cock fights, Siamese fighting fish and bullfighting (between two bulls) are popular in some rural areas, most Thais believe this is a violation of Buddhist ideals.

Dogs are usually treated differently than they are in the United States. Though some Thais have dogs as pets, they aren't often allowed into the house. Many dogs have no particular homes and look for food in the neighborhood garbage and may have rabies. Dogs are very low in Thai estimation. Calling someone a dog is a serious insult and Thais even avoid saying the word for dog if possible.

As for Americans, they tend to project human feelings onto animals. Advertisements and TV commercials appeal to this anthropomorphism by showing pets talking, dancing, singing or otherwise trying to communicate with their owners. Pets are sometimes treated like children and are given better care than people in some countries. Billions of dollars are spent in the U.S. for pet food, veterinarians, doggie toys, and other pet supplies.

In the U.S., it's not unusual to let dogs and cats into the house. Some owners permit pets to sit on the furniture or even sleep in their beds. In supermarkets, there are long rows and many varieties of pet food—dry, wet, with meat, fortified with vitamins, cheese flavor, milk flavor, beef flavor, kidney flavor, and even Kosher. Labels on pet food list vitamin and mineral content and specify the correct amount to feed per serving in pounds and ounces.

There are special hospitals for animals and even veterinary specialists who treat only heart ailments or liver problems, for example. In New York, there are dog psychiatrists for neurotic poodles and it's possible to get contact lenses for a myopic mutt. When doggie dies, a funeral can be arranged with burial in a casket. Most large cities have pet cemeteries or an optional mausoleum.

Dogs have their own "beauty shops" where their fur is shampooed and cut or their toenails trimmed, and there are special nation-wide organizations called the Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals to protect the rights of animals. Americans can be fined for mistreating their dogs.

Some of these examples are extremes, of course, but they point out a general American fondness for animals and perhaps a certain loneliness in American culture.

THAI WAYS AND MY WAYS

The Ideal Self: What are some of the qualities that are admired in an individual in Thai culture?

Thais most admire individuals who lead virtuous lives according to the Buddhist ideals of gentleness, moderation, and generosity. Patriotism and education are admired. Social status and wealth, which reflect merit earned by good deeds in former lives, are also respected.

In "The Land of Smiles", life should not be taken too seriously; it should be enjoyed and problems forgotten as soon as possible. Thais often say mai pen rai, meaning "it doesn't matter" and try to appear carefree. Smiles, laughter, and a good sense of humor are well-regarded if they are not too boisterous. Smiles should be given freely, not only to friends but to everyone—whether you like them or not.

Westerners should remember that smiling does not always indicate amusement. Thais also smile or laugh when they are embarrassed or have made a mistake.

Work and activity should always include some element of fun. Life should not just be duty and responsibility. Thais uncompulsively accept work but try to make it as gay as possible. A common question asked about nearly everything is sanuk may? —"Was it fun?"

Though Thais may not seem serious to Western eyes, Buddhism teaches a certain detachment from life. One should accept fate and not worry needlessly about problems which prevent life from being enjoyed. Americans value activity and doing; Thais value interpersonal relationships and enjoyment of life.

It also seems that Thais avoid saying "no," especially to an elder or superior. It's too direct and may cause a loss of face. "Maybe" almost always means "no." Even when they say "yes," in response to a party or dinner invitation for example, Thais often don't show nor do they RSVP. It's just too impolite to say a direct "no" to an offer of hospitality, even if it can't be accepted. Not showing up is considered the gracious way out.

Americans need to become more sensitive to Thai facial expressions in order to be aware of when "yes" means "no." In Thailand it's sometimes better to be kind than to be honest.

On the other hand, Americans can be too direct. In the Thai point of view, Yankee honesty is carried too far. Americans use another person's first name quickly* and admire directness, informality, and getting to the point. Americans say they want to hear things the way they really are rather than just what is pleasant or polite. The

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*Thais use first names with the word khun in front, as in Khun Somsak. Using the first name in this way does not imply informality or intimacy. For close friends, nicknames like Fat, Ant, Pig, or Red are used.

plain and honest truth is given a lot of importance in America. The story of Washington chopping down the cherry tree is a story that may appear merely silly from the Thai point of view.

Americans believe that talking over a problem is the best way to solve it. In the Land of Smiles, silence or coping behavior is more valued, and speaking out critically about another person is considered in poor taste. Thais seem to avoid negative feedback and raising questions or doubts with status superiors.

In business, Americans tend to approach a problem in an impersonal and technical way. Just "getting the job done" is the goal of work. The Thais more often use personal relationships and their manipulation to solve problems. They often prefer to negotiate through an intermediary to avoid possible loss of face.

The Buddhist teaching of "right speech" requires that only good things be said about people. That is, "Speak no evil." A Thai virtue that may derive from this is called jai yen meaning "cool heart" or sangfroid. Ideally one is jai yen with another person of higher status, using flattery if necessary and allowing the status superior to win the game. A person who is jai yen is inventive and lives by his wits. He should be uninvolved, not be emotional or easily annoyed, be uncritical of others and avoid interpersonal conflict. Deceit and guile are occasionally necessary in an imperfect world but always should be done with a "cool heart." Disagreeable things are not said but a "sweet mouth" can be used to get what you want.

Westerners are sometimes told pleasant things they may want to hear rather than the unvarnished truth. This may cause suspicion because Americans are taught to be wary of too much praise.

The lack of jai yen is jai raan or "hot heart." Americans may feel there is sometimes justification in "standing up for your rights" and showing "righteous indignation," but in Thailand, anger is against Buddhist ideals of gentleness and detachment from life and perhaps is even immoral. It's vulgar to show impatience or raise one's voice with a superior and shows lack of jai yen. The best way to show your enemy is a bully is to appear to give in to him. Showing anger is the worst way to deal with a difficult situation.

Speaking softly shows good manners in Thailand. "Market mouth" is a term Thais use for a loud person who draws attention to himself. It implies that speaker is impolite, uneducated and unfriendly. Thais admire a person who shows them quiet respect and friendliness and dislike a noisy backslapper.

Unfortunately, the proper volume for speaking in the United States is louder than

the correct Thai volume and contributes to the image of the Ugly American. Westerners, who normally speak louder than Thais, seem, at first, to be constantly angry or bossy. When an American speaker wants to get the attention of a group, he speaks louder. When a Thai wishes to get attention, he speaks softer or remains silent until the group is quiet.

It's not uncommon for Westerners to bring up facts about their own past, without being specifically asked, in order to let others get to know them in a friendly conversation. Many Asians see this as egotistical and usually wait to be asked before revealing their past. Americans talk openly about their feelings, jobs and families, which are topics a Thai may or may not wish to discuss in a candid manner.

American concerns are self-expression, self-interest, self-development, and independence. Thai values are more directed toward family interest, people around them and interdependence.

Grace is another quality that Thais admire in both men and women, and Thai classical dance is very slow and expressive. Thai parents spend time training their children how to sit, move, and bow correctly. They believe that other people will judge whether a person is good or bad on the basis of how he controls his body. Children are encouraged to walk on their toes and make as little noise as possible so as not to chase away lucky spirits. Quick movements and noisy chatter are associated with monkeys.

Cleanliness is a virtue for Thais as it is for Americans. However, Thais are even more particular about being clean and smelling good and it's usual to bathe two or three times a day, which at first may seem excessive to an American newly arrived from Northern Minnesota in winter. But he may run the risk of offending sensitive Thai noses if he doesn't bathe as often as they do. Westerners also have body odors which are different from what Thais are used to due to the greater amounts of meat and dairy products that they consume.

An up-country greeting is sometimes "Have you had a bath?" It simply means, "How do you feel? Are you comfortable?" and is just a polite question like asking, "Have you had lunch yet?" An American needn't feel paranoid and run for his Right Guard on this account.

Modesty is also a personal virtue in both Thailand and the U.S., but Thai students who share a bathing room in the dorm would never bathe in the nude. They wear a loin cloth and pour water over their bodies from a bowl when there is no shower. It's usually a shock for Thai students who come to an American school and find that everyone showers nude in the gym locker room or dorm shower.

THAI WAYS AND MY WAYS: Social Relations

STATUS

Thai society is essentially nonegalitarian and the hierarchy is accepted as natural. This hierarchy is first presented to Thais as children, when they are taught in a permissive and undisciplining family to respect all older members of the family. This is why they are able to accept a subordinate position in the social hierarchy without resentment.

Another reason may be that Buddhism teaches that a person's position in life depends on good or bad deeds in former lives. If a man is in a high position, it is because he has earned it by making merit. It is his karma to be respected.

While Americans tend to see people as basically the same, except for educational and environmental influences, Thais see clear, inner differences. The uniqueness of the person is inherent and is not always brought out by his actions. That is why each person's "face" or dignity is so important--an insult is an attack on one's individuality. Personal criticism is a more serious provocation in Thailand than in America.

In general, status is decided by age, job, wealth, family, sex, and education in Thailand. Though it's true Thais are status conscious, the class system is not rigid, so it's possible to move up the social scale if one has good karma and an opportunity for education. A Thai should accept his station in life but can improve it if fate does not intervene.

In America, the middle-class value is equality, and Americans try to minimize differences in status when they interact, in order to feel more comfortable. Thais maximize the differences and prefer to interact formally with people of higher or lower status.

Thai traditions stress the importance of politeness and respect to status superiors, and it is often said that no two people in the country have the same status: younger must respect elder; a student shouldn't question the teacher; children care for and obey parents all their lives, employee does not contradict employer or his superiors, etc. Prime virtues are courtesy, smooth social relationships, and avoidance of open conflict. This is why Thailand is called "The Land of Smiles."

Body language also speaks of status very "loudly" in Thailand. Postures and gestures for superiors are prescribed. The person of lower status should stand up straight with hands at his sides and have little eye contact. To show more respect, he may bend forward with one hand on top of the other at belt level.

When Thais meet, they don't shake hands but greet each other with a wai--placing both hands together at the chest. More respect can be shown to a person of higher status by placing the hands higher and bending a bit lower. The younger or lower status person initiates the wai. Not returning the greeting would be like refusing a handshake in the West (except in the case of adult to child).

Thais also wai to the teacher when he enters and leaves a classroom, to Buddha images and sacred spirit houses, to pagodas or chedis containing relics of the Buddha, to statues of the king and former kings, and to parents when leaving for and returning from school.

In Thailand, people you have just met may ask questions that seem too "personal" to Americans. I was often asked how old I was, whether I had a Thai mistress, or how much things that I owned cost. Remember that in the Thai language there are many pronouns that mean "you." The correct pronoun to use depends on the age and status of the listener. Questions like these may simply be asked to discover the best way to show you respect according to your status. It's okay not to give precise answers to personal or financial questions if you don't wish to.

The concept of what is "personal" is different in each culture. An American might also offend a Thai by asking certain questions about job, feelings, or family that are considered "personal" in Thailand.

Elders are respected and honored in Thailand. Thai families are patriarchal and the elders make the important decisions. Adult children often continue to obey their parents' advice, live in the same house, and they may assume total responsibility for their parents when they are old, and often for other relatives, too. The eldest male is head of the household.

In contrast, older Americans often prefer to be independent and are proud not to be a "financial burden" on their children. American parents often try to become friends

with their adult children. They may assist them if they don't "interfere." Those who cannot care for themselves sometimes live in a nursing home rather than with their married children. To a Thai, this would be shocking and shameful--paying strangers to take care of one's parents.

In the U.S., youth is valued over old age, and sexual attractiveness and looking young are important concerns. The opinions of youth should be considered and we must build for "the future generation."

In Thailand, even the level of a person's head in relation to others of different status can be important. A younger person's head could not be higher than an elder's when sitting and talking. Likewise, a student's head should be lower than a teacher's. Nor are objects passed or thrown over someone's head. It's courteous to sit on the floor if your host does because sitting higher than your host would imply superiority.

For Americans, too, space and size can establish prestige. Judges sit in high places. An executive's desk size or office size connote status and power, as does a higher office near corners or windows in a high-rise office building. Americans prefer big cars because bigger is often considered better, and superlatives are freely used in advertising.

Another group with very high status in Thailand is Buddhist monks. There are special, formal rules to follow with them. Their hands should not be shaken nor should they be greeted in a familiar way. People shouldn't touch them (especially women) or sit higher than them. Do offer monks a seat on a bus or train and stand and walk with them when they enter or leave your house. Don't block their paths as they walk or cross your legs in their presence.

Monks themselves cannot refuse any food offered them because the giver is making merit, though they aren't obligated to eat it, and they cannot speak or say "thank you" to the giver.

Teachers, too, have very high status and there are occasions when a student might approach a teacher on her knees. Once, when I was teaching in Thailand, a student did this to me. As an American, I was embarrassed and told the student it wasn't necessary to kneel. Later, another Thai teacher asked me not to undermine Thai traditions. He

said that a teacher's authority is not to be questioned and the posture showed respect to the "role" of teacher and not to any individual so this posture was not demeaning to the student.

As far as occupations go, teachers probably have the highest status. They play their roles by being more conservative in dress, appearance, and manner. A male teacher should wear a white shirt, dark trousers, and tie, and he should not have a mustache, beard, or long hair.

During the first term, on a Thursday, the students celebrate wai khruu or Teacher's Day. Ritual articles like candles, flowers, and incense are presented as the students file past the teachers. Monks chant and the students recite the learner's pledge to show their high respect for teachers.

American teachers, especially at colleges and universities, have more leeway in these areas. While many teachers wear ties and suits, many do not. There is also a difference between schools in eastern and western America--the West being less formal.

The King and Queen of Thailand are the persons most honored and respected. Thais will often wai to the statue or picture of the King to show their love and respect. The King's birthday, on December 5, is a national holiday when the city is decorated with lights, as Americans do at Christmas. Foreigners should be careful when talking about the royal family, the government, or Buddhism.

Though Americans are proud of their country, they also spend an amount of time criticizing its faults and its leaders. But if a foreigner joins in, they become defensive, as do the Thais in the opposite situation.

The press has portrayed American politicians, especially President Carter, in ways that would seem disrespectful in Thailand. For example, the ex-president was often photographed playing baseball, jogging in a sweat suit and fainting, or kissing his wife.

In America, government itself is somewhat suspect and exists for the benefit of the individual rather than vice versa. Elected representatives are theoretically the same as the average person whom they represent.

Personality counts heavily in politics. Sometimes movie stars (Reagan, Shirley

Temple), astronauts (John Glenn), or sports figures (Bob Mathias) are elected to political office.

SEX ROLES

Thai ideals of women are of nurturing and submissive mothers and sisters. Women are thought to be small and fragile and must wait patiently for a man to "capture" her. It is believed that she was born a woman because she didn't accumulate enough "merit" to be born as a man. Thai men still have more rights than Thai women.

In the U.S., sex roles are changing rapidly in the direction of equality as a result of the women's liberation movement. The Equal Rights Amendment to the Constitution hopes to formalize the ideal of equality for women.

Distinct sex roles and the double standard they imply are still strong in Thailand. It may seem that, sexually, the average Thai woman lives in the mid-Victorian era while Thai men live in late Roman Empire. Dating of young couples alone is just recently becoming common. For the men, there are numerous massage parlors and hotels with resident women.

In the U.S., dating without a chaperon starts as young as twelve or thirteen and is common by age sixteen. Mothers encourage daughters to date many different boys—probably hoping they won't get serious about any <u>one</u> and marry too young. Premarital sex and birth control are common but not approved of by everyone.

Ideal Thai women should be cool and unagressive, but smiling. They should nourish and cherish their husbands. Though women usually control the finances of the household and about one third work on farms or in schools and the civil service, business and politics are thought to be topics of discussion for men. Parties with men only are not uncommon because Thai men feel that women are so reserved and polite they put a damper on it and the men can't behave as freely as they might otherwise.

Men have a secret language or word play called <u>kham phuan</u>. By exchanging certain syllables and tones of a phrase, the message takes on a sexual meaning. Women do not, or perhaps pretend not to understand.

Even at the top of the social scale, the King and Queen have their prescribed sex role. For example, in official portraits the Queen is always standing to the

King's left and slightly behind him.

In the U.S., sex roles are changing and many traditionally male jobs are opening to women. Forty-two percent of the work force is female. And men are more willing to help out a bit with the housework. A few men are experimenting with the role of househusband--staying at home with the kids while the wife brings home the bacon.

These days, American men may hesitate to show old-fashioned courtesies because of sensitivity to changing women's roles. Opening the door for a woman may be slightly offensive to some "liberated" women, implying that they are too delicate to open it themselves. Paying a check at a business luncheon with female collegues is another example of an awkward situation for American men. No one quite knows how to behave with women these days without giving offense.

According to Thai etiquette, men are theoretically supposed to offer bus seats to women, small children, monks or old people. As in America, it doesn't always happen that way.

Another prescribed behavior is that "nice" Thai girls don't smoke, drink alcohol, or cross their legs in public. To sit politely, a girl sits on the floor with her legs folded under her to one side. (She may also sit in a chair with her ankles crossed.) If she shifts her legs too often, it is considered ill-mannered. In America, however, most women would not feel out of place smoking, drinking socially or crossing her legs at the knee.

A Thai man may cross his legs at the knee if not in the company of a status superior. This posture may appear slightly feminine to Western eyes. That is because American men more often cross their legs with one ankle on the other knee. To Thais, this appears rather rustic or "cowboy style." It shouldn't be done in front of a Thai you hope to impress favorably.

Touching behavior is also very different. In fact, it is opposite to the American concept of what is appropriate. Both Thais and Americans have misunderstood each others' touching behavior.

Try to predict how a Thai seeing two men holding hands while walking would react.... If you said "with indifference," you are right. Two men holding hands in

the West would strongly suggest homosexuality. In Thailand, as well as in India and many Arab countries, holding hands with a close friend of the same sex is normal.

In fact, many Thai people of the "older generation" would disapprove of a man and a woman holding hands in public. During the Viet Nam War, when thousands of American soldiers were in their country, perhaps the greatest cause of bad feeling toward the U.S. presence was the fact that the soldiers would touch and walk hand in hand with Thai bar girls in the street.

When there is a romantic interest, it would be very gauche to show it publicly. Thai men do not touch women's hands or arms in public, and at weddings, the male guests do not kiss the bride.

Another behavior difference connected with sex roles is that a Thai woman rides side-saddle on the back of a motorcycle, hanging onto the seat. It's improper to hang on around a man's waist. If an American girl rode on a motorcycle, she would ride straddle and hang onto the driver. It is illegal to ride ~~ride~~ side-saddle on a motorcycle in the U.S.

Thais are quick to assume there is romance if a man and woman are seen together several times in friendly conversation. They believe that, "Where there's smoke, there's fire."

Thais also believe that the most beautiful woman has the whitest skin. Thai women avoid the sun if they can. The most beautiful women are said to come from Chiengmai in the northern, mountain province. But American women (and men) spend hours in the sun to get that healthy-looking tan.

FRIENDSHIP

The Thais have a concept of "eating friend" or "play friend" versus a "die friend," (puan gin, puan len, and puan taay). Eating friends feast when you feast and are not really friends. The idea of a play friend is "You scratch my back..." Die friends, who will be your friend until death, are very rare.

Though Thais believe everyone should be treated politely and in a friendly manner, Buddhism teaches that each man is alone and responsible for himself on his path to sawan (heaven). One can be friendly and courteous without necessarily having personal

involvement.

The concept of jai yen, or "cool heart" that was discussed earlier, fits in with this. It's okay to pretend deference to others to get what you want or solve problems by manipulating personal relationships.

As for friendship toward Westerners, Europeans are welcomed in Thailand, but there is also a feeling of ambivalence towards foreigners--especially Chinese and Japanese. The ethnic Chinese are usually tradesmen rather than civil servants, which Thais prefer to be, and sometimes are looked down on by Thais. The Japanese are remembered for their cruel treatment when they occupied the country during World War II, but trade connections with Japan are now increasing rapidly.

As said before, a new acquaintance in Thailand may be asked questions that seem too personal from the American point of view. Thais ask these question to get to know you personally and feel that anyone who has nothing to hide will respond freely. If an acquaintance were not asked these questions, it would mean that he was of no interest.

It is important for Thais to define a person socially before getting down to any business, and Thais quickly ascertain status differences through conversation. Americans tend to do the opposite; when they try to get down to business before the social amenities are exchanged, Thais may feel either embarrassed at the impersonality of the interaction or feel coerced or intimidated by the "agressiveness" of the American.

Another possible explanation for an American's unwillingness to answer these so-called personal questions about age, finances, and love life is that American social relations are relatively "impersonal" in many ways. Americans don't seem to easily permit intimacy with other people around them. They are taught it is a virtue to put work before pleasure or socializing, and expect friends to telephone before dropping over. Privacy is considered a basic right of the individual.

Even the word "friend" can be used both for someone you've met once before and for someone you've known for a lifetime. Americans are friendly and trusting but impersonal in the sense that they are more objective and impartial in social relations. For example, they can usually work with someone whose religious or political convictions they disapprove of.

American friends are often associated with a certain time or place and are segmented into groups such as work friends, drinking buddies, friends to invite over for dinner, friends for playing bridge or tennis. The business and social world are often separated.

Americans often go to professional listeners like bartenders, marriage counselors, or psychiatrists to tell their personal problems because it's safer than to discuss them with friends.

Also, geographical mobility is high so American are encouraged to make friends quickly and casually. They feel they have a right to choose friends of the kind which suit them, but there is seldom a total commitment to a friend as, for example, between the Lone Ranger and Tonto. The American wife or husband takes on this intimate role.

For Thais, personal interaction is more important and they seem to need less privacy--especially within the family.

NON-VERBAL BEHAVIOR

Non-verbal behavior includes such topics as posture, gestures, facial expressions, choice of clothing or hair style, eye contact, touching behavior, and silence, and almost all researchers in Intercultural Communication share the belief that non-verbal communication is very important. It is a "Silent Language" (Hall)--an intricate system of communication that should be familiar to anyone entering an unfamiliar culture. It has often been pointed out that when a speaker's spoken message conflicts with the non-verbal message from his face and body, it is the non-verbal message which is believed.

Let's look at some examples of American and Thai non-verbal communication that would be misinterpreted by members of the opposite culture:

Some Americans have a habit of raising their eyebrows from time to time during a conversation. It's usually unconscious and may serve to show sincerity and interest in the listener. It can also indicate surprise or disapproval when Americans "raise their eyebrows" at someone who is breaking a rule or showing bad taste. Thais, who don't usually use this gesture, see it as simply a curious action that might be misunderstood as flirtation.

Polite Thais should avoid looking at someone straight in the eye except briefly.

It's proper to avert your eyes and face a bit when standing close to another person and talking--especially to a superior. In former times, a Thai citizen was not even allowed to look directly at the King and Queen when they passed.

Americans may distrust a person who "can't look you in the eye." For them, looking at the face of the person they are listening to shows confidence, openness, and attention. Because of this difference in eye contact behavior, Thais may appear bashful or untrustworthy to Westerners.

Sticking out your tongue at another person would be an insult in both countries, but in Thailand, even showing your tongue to lick a stamp, an envelope or an ice cream cone shows bad manners. Thais use a wet sponge in a dish to wet a stamp; Americans more often lick it. Thai men and women sometimes even cover their mouths with their hands, when they laugh, to hide their tongue and teeth--a gesture seen as effeminate in U.S. culture.

An American calling someone with a typical hand gesture for American is insulting in his action, but he may not realize it. Americans gesture "come here" with one finger or all fingers pointed up. Thais only use this gesture with animals or small children. To call other people, Thais wave their hand with the fingers pointed down, similar to the American gesture for "go away" or "goodbye."

In Thailand, waving a vertical hand horizontally across the face means something smells bad. Americans wrinkle their noses or pinch them with their fingers.

A very important fact to be aware of is the Thai attitude toward the right and left hand. Only the right hand should be used to accept or give important objects like money and food or to touch other people. The left hand has a special use in personal hygiene that makes it unfit for human contact. A book is another one of those important objects since it is connected with knowledge and education and is given and accepted only with the right hand.

As you can see, Thais and American read body language differently. Body language cues are usually picked up unconsciously and affect a person's "gut reaction" to people he meets. The misunderstanding occurs when two cultures meet. Here are some more examples:

When two people are talking and a third person has to pass between them, a polite

Thai bends over or bows while walking past so as not to disturb their conversation. They may also bend over like this to take their seat in a movie after it has started or to enter a classroom after the teacher has begun to speak.

Sitting on a table or desk is another mistake. American teachers often do this while lecturing. In Thailand, a table is for eating and shouldn't be used for sitting.

At the beginning of their stay in Thailand, many foreigners are unconscious of the fact that the bottom of the foot has any disrespectful meaning to a Thai. They are often seen unknowingly "giving someone the foot" by pointing the soles of their shoes towards another person.

It's also normal to take off your shoes when entering a Thai house.(And remember not to step on the door sill where lucky spirits may reside.) Not taking your shoes off would imply superiority to the host.

IN PUBLIC

A Westerner in Thailand will feel, for a while, that all eyes are on him--especially up-country. The fact that Europeans look different from Thais is neither good nor bad in itself; it's simply a fact that a foreigner must adjust to since the only alternative is to change the whole host culture. Another reason for a Westerner feeling a loss of privacy is that it's usually necessary (and cheap) to employ servants, as many Thai families do. Americans are not used to having servants in the house and may feel self-conscious with them in the beginning.

A response that Westerners sometimes have to being noticed a lot is to become over-sensitive or slightly paranoid. Try to keep perspective and a sense of humor. In Thailand, the interest is almost always friendly. Just return the look with a smile and Thais will respond likewise.

Another aspect of public Thai culture that Americans should be aware of is the fact that Thai merchants are ready to bargain for almost everything they sell. So don't feel shy about haggling over the price (but never get angry). This is especially true in the Floating Market. Because most Western tourists eventually visit this market, the initial asking prices may be higher than usual.

The price for all taxis and samlors (tricycles with motors) is "bargainable" and

should be agreed on before you get in. Even though the majority of taxis have meters, they are seldom used. The exceptions to bargaining are large department stores and restaurants. The prices are fixed there.

A Westerner who does not bargain and later discovers that he paid too much, may feel he has been cheated. But, in fact, the mistake was his in not following Thai custom. Americans aren't used to bargaining for things they buy anyway. Some exceptions are in buying a house or a used car, and garage sales.

Another public difference is in driving habits, which can be a frightening and frustrating experience in Bangkok. Other drivers are not courteous and there is a lot of horn-honking and engine noise. Allow more time to reach your destination because of very heavy traffic. The secret to driving in Thailand is to drive defensively and give any car which is even slightly ahead of you the right-of-way and don't look back. Assume cars in front of you will change lanes at any moment. And traffic drives on the left, as in England.

DRESS

Clothing also sends out a non-verbal message, and there are cultural differences as to what is appropriate. In general, Thai dress more conservatively. Students usually wear uniforms--a white shirt with dark trousers or skirt. Male teachers and civil servants also wear white shirts, ties, and dark trousers. Women wear more fashionable clothing to teach or work in but should not dress in a way that calls attention to themselves. Shorts are never worn by adults in the street in town (except coolies)--only at the beach.

A suit and tie are required for all visitors to the Royal Palace, even if the temperature is 95 degrees with 80% humidity. Women may not wear sleeveless dresses or decollete.

The battle over long hair was also fought with the younger generation. In the past, customs officials at the airport have required haircuts for so-called "hippies" in order to enter the Kingdom, but this is no longer true.

In the U.S., adult men and women wearing shorts is a common sight almost everywhere in the summer. So are sleeveless blouses. Sometimes even brief halter tops are worn by women.

DINING

Going into a tropical climate has some health risks for the foreigner with no immunity to local bacteria, and Americans are always warned not to drink the water. Thais have to make a similar adjustment to American germs.

But the dilemma occurs when your host offers you a tall, black glass of iced coffee, which you imagine was made with big chunks of sawdust-covered ice delivered from the local ice factory on the back of a bicycle. Should you risk getting the dropsy or decline the drink and insult you host? Or sneak a halazone tablet into your glass and hope nobody notices when your drink turns red?

Thai cuisine has had many influences--especially from India and China. The usual dishes are made with vegetables, rice, fruit, and fish, beef, pork, or chicken. Like Indian curries, Thai dishes are extremely spicy at times. That is why Thais think most American food is tasteless and bland. On the other hand, your first bite of spicy Thai curry may taste like fire.

Thais have no religious taboos on what they can eat, and there is a long list of exotic foods to try. There are fruits never seen in the U.S., like durian, mangosteen, and rambutan. There are many kinds of pastries and desserts with new tastes, like those made from coconut milk. In the markets and restaurants you may be tempted to taste octopus, intestine soup, monkey brains, barbequed lizard or bat's blood. You certainly have to try the salty fish sauce made from fermented liquids taken while drying out fish.

Thais have some special manners connected with eating that are different from American manners. It's not polite, for example, to offer someone food you don't want as Americans sometimes do when they say, "Would you like the rest of this? I've eaten all I want." Just offer the food.

And when a Thai visits your home, it's polite to offer tea or a cold drink. You should offer it more than once because Thais often decline once or twice out of politeness but will accept the third offer if they are actually thirsty.

Thais consider it bad manners to eat anything while walking in the street. The same is true for drinking. It's better to sit down to eat or drink.

Thai meals are sometimes served on mats on the floor with everyone sitting around plates of food. Talking should be at a minimum to preserve serenity while eating. The ideal is to sit up straight and chew quietly.

You may have thought Thai people ate with chopsticks like the Chinese. They sometimes do, but more often they eat with a fork in the left hand and a large spoon in the right. The meat is already cut into small pieces so a knife is not necessary. Putting the fork and spoon together parallel on the plate is a signal that you have finished and do not want a second helping. It's best to eat moderately and leave a little food on the plate in keeping with the Buddhist virtue of moderation.

Americans eat with a knife, fork and spoon. The knife and fork are used to cut the meat, but then the knife is put down while the fork is often changed to the right hand to actually eat the meat. Forks and spoons are not used together, as they are in Thailand, but one at a time. It's a compliment to the cook if everything on the plate is eaten, and a guest will usually be offered a second helping.

Some American foods, like nuts, sandwiches, fruit, hamburgers and hot dogs, are usually eaten with the hands. At picnics, fried chicken is, too. In rural Thailand, many people eat sticky rice by wadding it into a tight ball with their right hand and dipping it into sauces. But the important thing to remember in Thailand is not to touch or pass food with the left hand.

If a Thai uses a toothpick after, dinner, it's polite to cover the mouth with one hand or a napkin. From the American point of view, this calls needless attention to what you are doing. In most situations in America, it's not polite to use a toothpick at all, but if a toothpick <u>is</u> used, an American would normally not cover his mouth.